

FIVE ACES

Entry No. 21 in Our Prize Story Competition By VICTOR ROUSSEAU

I HAVE heard men who have been wounded on the battlefield say that the swift shock of the bullet stuns and benumbs and bears with it its own anodyne, so that it is only afterward that pain comes, and remembrance of the wounding. So it was with the blow that fell upon me. It fell so swiftly that only recently, after the passage of years, have I been able to piece together my fragmentary recollections of it. For a long period I could remember only that at one moment we were all seated together at the card table in the Crown Prince's quarters, brothers in arms, and that an instant afterward I was standing alone, confronting them, an outcast, denied, by every honorable code, further acknowledgment from my brother officers.

Americans have said to me that affability is the price Princes pay for their sinicures. That was not so with Prince Lothair at any time. In those days, when, although Crown Prince, he held no more than a Major's commission in the Fifth Imperial Uhlans, he was as a brother to all of us, from stern old Colonel Heller, who had been peppered with shrapnel at Gravelotte, and whose temper had ever since been like a pepper-caster with a loose lid, to young Graf von Obersee, the youngest subaltern. And if a divinity hedged him, as Shakespeare would say, by reason of the fact that some day, when God should please to recall to Himself his father, the reigning Prince, Lothair would become ruler of Thüringen-Gotha, it was for the office that we showed reverence, but for the man merely love and comradeship. In barracks or out, with us Lothair was no more than a brave officer and a good friend, and many a young sprig from Essen or Berlin or Hamburg could spend money more freely, for his debts always curtailed the Prince's means.

Of late this fact of Lothair's indebtedness had been discussed in no veiled language among the baser newspapers. The bride whom he had chosen, and was soon to wed, a Princess of a landless, mediatised line, would bring him little dowry; nor could he cumber the scant revenues of his father with his obligations. But, though rumors were rife, and even we shared in the speculations that were hazarded, Lothair bore himself as though no creditor had ever thrust his shadow into the sun of his nobility.

ON this evening we were to play poker, a game but recently introduced into our part of Germany, and still novel to many of us. I recall how the Prince held up one of the new packs of cards that he had had sent from America.

"They say that only with Yankee cards can one enter into the spirit of this game," he said, laughing, and we all sat down at the lunge table, joking like schoolboys.

Old Colonel Heller had the first deal, and when I looked at my hand I found that fortune had given me two aces, the ace of hearts and the pictured ace of spades. I drew three cards; but gained nothing.

Then the betting began, and one after another they dropped out—the Colonel, young Graf von Obersee, Captain Schmidt, Adjutant Sonnenberg, leaving only myself against the Prince. I bet five marks; he raised me five; I made it fifteen. He called my hand, at the same time laying down his own—two aces, clubs and diamonds. As he did so, his sleeve disclosed the top card of the pack, which slipped to the floor.

I felt my heart leap and begin pounding like a runaway nag. A white haze crept up from the floor and blinded me; but through it I could still discern my hand dimly,—the ace of hearts and that terrible ace of spades,—terrible because there were five aces in the Prince's American pack; for the card on the floor was the ace of spades also.

I think no one had seen it fall. I stooped and picked it up. I rose out of my chair. I remember seeing the clear blue eyes of the old Colonel turned on me in surprise. A ring of smoke curled upward out of his pipe and floated toward the ceiling. Graf von Obersee was whispering to Captain Schmidt, and Adjutant Sonnenberg was tapping the ashes out of his pipe into a tray. Then I saw the Colonel's smoke ring break into a volute and the fog hid everything.

"I have three aces," I said, and laid my hand on the table. "Your Highness, Gentlemen, my resignation will be received for posting tomorrow morning."

I clicked my heels, bowed, and backed out toward the door. I recollect with what slowness all their expressions changed; then I had closed the door and passed



"Your Highness, My Resignation Will Be Received for Posting Tomorrow!"

into the barrack yard and so to the street. For in Thüringen-Gotha one does not let gossip accuse the Crown Prince of cheating at cards.

THERE remained two hours before the night train started for Hamburg. I went to see Elisabeth. Though her parents and she inhabited only a small house in an unfashionable district, she bore sixteen quarters. Americans do not understand what aristocracy means. You think that it is pleasure and wealth and the power to command. Truly; but how are these gained? What are the rights and duties that accompany them? First, then, it is our right to be the first to die for our country in time of war. Then, again, it is our duty never to be for gain, never to betray, nor to do any dishonorable thing. Otherwise we become cowards in the presence of danger. So, because of these things, we must keep truth with honor; and, because of them, I must needs face her scorn.

The old folks were ailed. Our engagement had been of long standing, and in a year I should have attained my captaincy, and then—well, that dream was ended.

"Elisabeth," I said, "I have come to bid you goodby. Tomorrow my resignation will be posted at the barracks. Tonight my life comes to an end. If it begins again overseas, that is a new life, you understand, not this one."

She did not flinch; but just put out her hands to me. "You have refused to fight a duel, Karlchen!" she said. "You told me once that if ever—Have you considered well?"

"No," I replied. "I was caught cheating at cards."

"You—cheating?" she said, and, leaning back against the edge of the door, she began to laugh softly. "No, Karl, you did not cheat," she said.

Then I broke into a wild torrent of words. I had cheated, I cried; for I had been wretchedly in debt for years. I had been tempted and had succumbed; for otherwise I saw no means of marrying her. It was for her sake I cheated. That hardened her, as I had meant it to do; for the first time she began to believe me, and I saw her press her hand to her bosom and peer into my eyes, as though to read them. Gradually, as I stumbled through my premeditated story, I saw her own eyes darken. When I concluded they were full of scorn and disdain.

"And you came here to tell me this?" she questioned. "Only to say farewell," I answered.

She softened somewhat at these words. "Yes, yes, I begin to understand," she said. "But you should not have come. It was for me to go to you. When I looked into your dead face I should have forgiven you. Death wipes out all stains, Karlchen."

"But I am not going to die; I am going to America," I stammered.

The blood receded from her face and left her white as a dead woman. She stretched her hand forth, feeling for support, and found my shoulder. "Karl," she said, "when—a certain officer—ran away in haste, he blew his brains out, and they buried him from a gun carriage among the heroes."

"I am afraid!" I whispered, and sank into a chair and hung my head in shame. I heard her come softly toward me; I felt her breath in my hair. Then she was gone, and I knew that the kiss was but a valediction.

You do not understand. But if your land, America, had been for centuries a prey to foemen who had har-

ried and drained it, if your women had been conquerors' spoil and the courage of your men broken, then, if one stock had welled yon with steel and blood, so that your bodies were your country's living walls and your leaders' honor yours—do you not understand?

I WROTE my resignation on a sheet of paper and posted it. I left for Hamburg, still in my undress uniform, concealed only by my overcoat, which I had mechanically taken from its peg when I walked out of the barracks. At Hamburg I purchased a steerage ticket for America, vaguely remembering that a friend of my father, whom he had forgiven a debt, had settled and prospered there. I reached New York with twelve dollars in my purse, and they held me at Ellis Island for a special board.

"How comes it, Herr von Mesenrath, that you have no more money?" asked a white-haired official who presided. "Have you no means, no profession?"

I looked at him and saw that he too had been a soldier. His trade was in his bearing, his blunt and courteous speech, his searching eyes.

"I have two hands to work," I said, and, flinging back my overcoat, displayed my uniform. "I shall not beg," I said.

I saw him whisper with the board, and they nodded their heads.

"We will admit you, Lieutenant," said the presiding officer. "I myself will stand sponsor for you; for I fought at Solowa in your own regiment, as a trooper, under your father. Remember only this, Lieutenant: here all service is honorable."

I SHOULD have become a soldier, but for the need that I should renounce my country. That I would not do. So, since I was delirious from all association with my own people, and could neither apply for aid at the Consulate nor for work to any of the mercantile firms of my own nationality, I joined a gang of workmen who were building the aqueduct that was to bring water to New York from the mountains.

At first the strain was almost mendacious. But soon I grew accustomed to the work; afterward I came to love it and the fatigue for the respite they brought me. For I learned that the body can become master of the soul, and physical stress can cast oblivion over the preoccupations of the mind. After some months I became able to remember the past calmly. I even took pleasure and pride in the reflection that God had given me a part to play for my country, surely no less a one than that of my father, who fell at Mars-la-Tour, leading his regiment, even though I played it in silence and solitude, cheered by no comradeship or trumpet call. I came also to think of Elisabeth as one who had died, or as one whom I had loved in some past life, dimly remembered. She was the power that nerved me to endurance.

After six months I was made foreman. Often at night I would sit beside the card players in the laborers' tent, smoking and watching them. But I never touched a card.

You remember the accident at Grays Bend Tunnel? A wall of rock caved in after a premature dynamite discharge and killed and injured twelve. I was one of those hurt—an arm and a leg were broken, and I lay for weeks in a hospital. When I was well there was no work for me. As foreman, I had to bear the blame for

the catastrophe. I was discharged, and was too weak to find a pick as a laborer again.

I returned to New York and walked the streets, penniless. Frightful were the temptations that assailed me now. I could go to my Consul, or to my father's friend, a merchant on State-st., whom he had forgiven the debt. In the end I remembered my sponsor's words, "All service is honorable." I became a waiter in a German restaurant on 14th-st.

Two years went by. When I look back on these I can comfort myself with the assurance that they were wholly good for me. I, who had commanded men, now learned to serve them; I ran to obey; I received monetary doles, who in past times had been prodigal of them. But ever before me stretched away that black vista of future years, and ever my heart went back to Germany.

When my grief healed, the memory of Elisabeth became a beacon light which lifted me above the mire and bore me through the sordid battles of the day. And gradually I came to see that in the materialism of this new country there lay dormant other ideals than ours, destined some day to bear abundant fruits when this new nation quickened and grew responsive to them,—ideals of civic righteousness, of a democracy for whom our own poor, narrow code of honor, the property of a small caste, should expand to be that of a nation.

I HAD served nearly three years when the Crown Prince of Thüringen-Gotha and his suite came to visit America. In the metropolis I fancied myself secure. There was room for both of us here, and it was the most unlikely thing that the heir to a principality would take himself to this obscure 14th-st. restaurant, to eat those German dishes that our good master supplied to a small group of lovers of the Fatherland's cookery.

Fate is more sure than that. For that was just what occurred. One evening, from where I served across the room, I saw Lothair enter, in evening dress, and with him Adjutant Sonnenberg and Graf von Obersee.

"Mesenrath," said the proprietor, hurrying to me after he had bowed low before his visitors and sent the waiters scurrying in all directions, "do you know who those gentlemen are? It is the Crown Prince of Thüringen-Gotha who has come to dine here. You will wait on his Highness," he continued excitedly; "but you will not show him that you know who he is; he is to be treated

only as an ordinary guest—such are his instructions. You will do credit to us, won't you, Mesenrath?"

I had been trained to obey commands, whether from a Captain or a hotel manager. There was no reason why I should flinch from facing Prince Lothair. So I went to his table, and, though my heart beat faster, I served him tolerably well, as a waiter should, and for a long time they did not recognize me. Then, as I was drawing the cork of their second bottle, I saw Adjutant Sonnenberg staring at me through his eyeglasses, and saw the Graf whisper to the Prince, who turned round in his chair and looked quickly in my direction. All this I saw while my eyes were glued on the cork; for a waiter learns to do things like this. When I came back they were seated in silence and their eyes were on the tablecloth.

I served the sweets and cheese and brought coffee,

and, if my heart was breaking, their own buoyancy of spirits had gone. There was but little change in them. The Prince looked more mature, and Graf von Obersee had sprouted a long, fair mustache; but otherwise they might have stepped out of the barracks together, as though those three years had been yesterday. And long forgotten memories stirred in me, and in imagination I heard the bugles blown and saw the long cavalry lines sweeping down the field proudly in review before the Prince's father, the ruler of Thüringen-Gotha. Then I looked down at my black coat and my stiff shirt, a little spotted with grease, with a napkin tucked into one corner, and—I went on serving.

When I would have assisted them with their overcoats they waved me aside and each helped his comrade. As they turned to go Graf von Obersee approached me and, flushing with shame, pressed a bill into my hand.

"From his Highness, Lieutenant von Mesenrath," he said.

But the title seemed then only a courtesy.

When they had left the restaurant our master came up to me, wearing a most woe-begone expression.

"Did you see how glum they were, Mesenrath?" he asked. "Now I wonder why they did not like my cooking."

"It was not that," I said. "The Prince was sad because he recognized a former friend among our waiters here."

The proprietor rubbed his chin some moments in perplexity; then the meaning was made clear to him. "Hein!" he said, scrutinizing me sharply. "You?"

It was no bill that Graf von Obersee had handed me. It was the resignation I had written out that night before I left for Hamburg. And in one corner was a penciled scribble:

His Highness will see Lieutenant von Mesenrath at his hotel at nine o'clock tomorrow morning.

A hundred times that night I swore I would not go. When I awoke, early, after an inquiet sleep, I renewed my resolution. At nine o'clock I found myself at the door of the Prince's apartment.

LOTHAIR was seated in a chair, reading a German newspaper; but when he saw me he rose to his feet and came forward, bowed, and pointed to a chair. But I remained standing before him.

"Lieutenant, you have been ab-

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Suddenly I saw the Adjutant Staring at Me.

THE POINT OF VIEW

As Overheard Between the Acts the First Night of a Broadway Musical Comedy

BY CHARLES BELMONT DAVIS

THE MANAGER, seated in private box, to CORPULENT WIFE: I KNEW it was a knockout the minute I read the lyrics of Brown's opening choris.

BROWN, to admiring friend in adjoining café: Congratulations on my lyrics? Don't make me laugh! There are only two lines of mine left in the whole show, and they come in the second act.

RIVAL MANAGER: It may be a hit; but I'm glad I don't have to pay for the production. Why, before they dared to bring it in, they had to hire seven playwrights, four producers, and throw out Smith's entire score. Every number in the piece was written on 28th-st. and cost a thousand a throw.

SMITH, to ADMIRING FRIEND, also in adjoining café: Oh, I'm glad you liked my little jingles—light but popular.

FIRST FIRST-NIGHTER: Well, I got three good laughs. SECOND FIRST-NIGHTER: During the comedian's song?

FIRST FIRST-NIGHTER: No; the three times I thought of how much I'd paid the speculator for my seat.

CRITIC to FRIEND: Confound those first act finales with a brass band! Don't they ever expect a man to get any sleep at all?

FIRST USHER to SECOND USHER: Gee! but this ushering is tough work! My hands get calloused applauding all the time.

FIRST MUSIC PUBLISHER to SECOND MUSIC PUBLISHER: You robber! You stole that "Rose Petals" song from our "Petals Rare!"

SECOND MUSIC PUBLISHER: You're a liar! We stole that song from "Roses Red."

SOCIETY LADY in box to FRIEND: Very amusing, isn't it?

FRIEND: It is an amusing play.

SOCIETY LADY: Oh, is it, really? I was speaking of Laura's having twins last night.

FIRST SHOWGIRL in big dressing room: Lillian got it over tonight, all right, all right! Some singer, Lillian! SECOND SHOWGIRL, who understudies Lillian: If that gink ever falls and breaks one of her bow-legs, I'll sing that entrance song of hers so that her voice will sound like a frog with the asthma! I hope her pipes freeze!

ANY CHORUS GIRL to ANY OTHER CHORUS GIRL: No, I mean the one with the full dress suit on the third seat in the second row to the right.

STAGE HAND: Betcher life Lillian Mortimer is a great artist! Why, the last engagement she played at this theater on her last night she gave the whole of a ten-spot to the grips for beer!

TIRED BUSINESS MAN: These musical comedies make me tired! Have you seen "How He Stole Five Millions"?

ANY WOMAN in center of any row to APOPLECTIC STRANGER in next seat: I'm afraid I dropped my hat-pin.

MAN IN BOXOFFICE, having heard faint rumors of a success, to PROSPECTIVE BUYER: Seven weeks from tomorrow night? Two nice ones on the twenty-second row only eight seats from the aisle.

INDIGNANT SPECTATOR, waving coupon at HOUSE MANAGER: That seat is directly behind a post! I can't see a thing!

HOUSE MANAGER: That's funny—you ought to see the post.

RIVAL LIBRETTIST: I wonder where Brown got that line about persimmons? I know my Gilbert pretty well; but I don't remember that one.

STAGE DOORMAN to JOHNNY who has offered him a perfector: Of course I don't know the name of her in the lilac dress and the green stockings. Run along with you! (Offer of cigar is raised to five-spot.) Sure, I remember now. It's Inez La Rue—she's the daughter of the wardrobe woman, Mrs. MacSpaddin.

THE ANGEL: I wonder who sent Lillian all those flowers out there in the lobby?

FIRST HEAVYWEIGHT CHORUS GIRL to SECOND HEAVYWEIGHT CHORUS GIRL, both unemployed: Did you pipe that chorus just out of the cradle? You've got to be a squab or a broiler or a pony to get a job these days. Ho for the days of Ed Rice and shapes, I say!

WARDROBE MISTRESS to SHOWGIRLS: Do be careful of those tulle dresses! If you get out of a walk, it's all over with them!

STAGE MANAGER to SHOWGIRLS: Now, you sillies, get some life into you! More ginger in your dancing, and kick as if you were talking to the manager!

LILLIAN to STAGE and incidentally REAL MOTHER: Get out of my dressing room, you old fool! How do you expect me to change my clothes, with you pawing and shlobbering all over me? Get out!

STAGE MOTHER outside to nearest STAGE HAND: Dear little Lillian isn't a bit upset by her success, just as sweet as ever to her dear old mother. Now, when I played in Evangeline.

HOUSE MANAGER to FIREMAN: Exits all clear to-night, eh?

FIREMAN: Sure, but you ought to fireproof some of those jokes, or you'll lose your insurance.

THE AUDIENCE: Rotten!

THE CRITICS: Hopeless!

THE ANGEL: What, five thousand more?

THE ELECTRIC SIGN: Success!

